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Conclusion: Dark tourism in a digital post-truth society

J John Lennon, Theme Editor

Abstract

Purpose: Reviews the Dark tourism concept as it applies to visitation, understanding and education in order to determine whether a gap exists between academic research and literature, the operation of dark tourism sites and the motivations of visitors.

Design/methodology/approach: Summarizes development of the dark tourism concept over a 20 year period and draws on the papers and debate among contributors to this theme issue in order to determine the role played by dark tourism in contemporary society.

Findings: Concludes that the concept of dark tourism remains relevant and that what is interpreted, merits educational focus and what is ignored is a function of the complex interaction of commercial potential, political will and social acceptability.

Practical implications: Incorporates the reflections of senior practitioners and academics in a comprehensive review of the dark tourism concept.

Originality/value: Provides a blend of academic and practitioner insight on a facet of tourism that is often misunderstood and even misinterpreted. Observes that dark tourism is an important way of remembering the past and that for many visitors, it offers a form of pilgrimage.

Keywords: Dark tourism research, Dark tourism operations, visitor attractions, visitor motivations.

Overview

As we face an uncertain future of populist Presidents, terrorist acts and increasing concerns with climate change and ‘natural’ disasters, dark tourism might appear as something of a niche interest. It appears to be located at the periphery of tourism study and its very existence is now being challenged by academics and practitioners in the field. As our society looks to abbreviated news feeds, hyperbolic electoral claims and increasing economic uncertainty concern over this interface between history, ideology and tourism might easily be labelled an affectation for academics and morbid visitors. Yet as can be seen from the preceding contributions to this journal and the academic research cited, the tourist’s attraction to dark sites is resilient and less than straightforward culturally. Dark sites are frequently critical to historical record and constitute in many cases ‘primary objects’, evidence based, protected, conserved, interpreted and marketed. They have become part of the ‘tourist gaze’, frequently visually choreographed, composed and framed for consumption (Urry, 1990). They offer the contrasting experience, the abridged history lesson and potential for humankind to observe our darkest shared heritage. Each of the contributions to this journal offer a contrasting reflection of this phenomena that remains current and relevant, visited and recorded in a society where time is at a premium, virtual experiences continue to gain traction and disposable leisure income is under pressure.

Interpretation, education, politicisation and conservation are central to the case analysis discussed in the papers in this journal. Interpretation and education are the primary means by which such museums and heritage sites communicate with visitors and tourists. It is through such educative interpretation that memory and audience engagement becomes selective. As Ham and Krumpal (1996, p.2) argued:

Interpretation, by necessity, is tailored to a non-captive audience – that is, an audience that freely chooses to attend or ignore communication content without fear of punishment, or forfeiture of reward

Interactivity and innovative exhibitory and interpretive techniques are increasingly central to the 'entertainment' and 'edutainment' experiences within the visitor attraction context. Interpretation or non-interpretation is the substance of commemoration or non-commemoration. Imagery, narrative and 'evidence' can have various impacts on audiences, often based on the political or cultural agendas of host destinations, curators, operators and governments. As Hollinshead (1999) and in this journal Wight et al (2016) argued, in such a context tourism is a means of production whereby the themes and sites viewed are cleverly constructed narratives of past events which can manipulate tourists beliefs, understanding and behaviour. In this sense such sites reflect configurations of political power and ideology.

The dark tourism concept: Is there a gap between theory and practice?

Tourism, suffering, death and incarceration continue to enjoy a curious relationship. Death and acts of mass killing are a major deterrent for the conservation and visitor development of certain destinations. As a consequent these dark histories and contexts can become the primary purpose of visitation. In other cases non-commemoration, lack of conservation and political imperatives to ignore or distort the past can still catalyse visitation. In the research that has emerged since identification and analysis of the phenomena occurred (Lennon and Foley 1996a and 1996b; Lennon and Foley 2000) dark tourism sites have been frequently identified as visitor 'pull' factors. Depending on a range of factors from context, politics, ideology or operational ethos dark sites can encourage visitors to appreciate the enormity of death, trauma and/or suffering in an increasing virtual and post-authentic world. These feelings and emotions (contributing in whole or part to the 'visitor experience') may occur at authentic sites or locations where dark events are memorialised in some cases for commemorative purposes or education and in others for crude commercial exploitation.

Since 1996, the terminology associated with the phenomenon; dark tourism, has been the subject of some debate. The phenomenon is neither new nor transitory. Earlier in 1993, Rojek had referred to 'Black spots' and 'Fatal Attractions' to highlight sites of fatality which he identified as a feature of post modernism (cf Rojek 1993 p136). As a definitional framework this was somewhat narrow and in the 1996 monographs *Dark Tourism: the attraction of death and disaster*; Lennon and Foley hypothesised that there are aspects of the ancient, modern and postmodern to be identified within the spectrum of dark tourism. The phenomenon continues to comprise:

- Visits to death sites and disaster scenes
- Visits to sites of mass or individual death
- Visits to sites of incarceration
- Visits to representations or simulations associated with death
- Visits to re-enactments and human interpretation of death

It is notable that, Eagleton (2010) reaffirmed the enduring human attraction of context, notions and evidence of evil. However 'evil' as a term of moral approbation and disapproval suffers from being defined by objective criteria. As Ayer (1973) notes such terms cannot be defined rationally without measurement of 'evil acts' on a human slide rule of moral disgust. The fundamental difficulty of labelling 'evil' and for the purposes of this debate; 'dark', is where the issue of moral approbation of terminology begins and ends.

The interpretation of dark heritage (as for heritage more generally) is the result of complex interactions and pressures between stakeholders and interest groups. This pressure is perhaps more acute in the case of 'dark' sites or the dissonant heritage of Ashworth and Hartmann (2005). Heritage is itself a contested terrain and the pursuit of historical 'accuracy' is invariably compromised by competing ideologies, interpretation, funding, and politicisation and so on. As Lowenthal (1998) valuably highlighted defining heritage let alone agreeing a verifiable truth will invariably remain elusive. In dark

tourist sites developed as attractions, education facilities, visitor centres explored in this journal such issues are continually confronted. Seaton (2001) offered valuable insight in the context of the heritage of slavery:

“.... Heritage is never a stable, finally completed process but a constantly evolving process of accommodation, adjustment and contestation. This perspective contrasts with that of heritage development as a battle between unproblematic, historical truth and various kinds of bad faith, ranging from commercial to political.”

(Seaton, 2001, p126)

Commemoration, history and its problematic and contrasting representation in heritage centres, education facilities, perpetrator sites and various combinations of these functions is the result of complex interactions of contrasting perceptions, ideologies and interests. Dann and Seaton (2001) offer a valuable illustration of such complexities in their critique of the so called ‘domination’ critique of perceptions of interpretations and operation of slavery as heritage tourism. This simplistic view does not reflect the complex realities of which heritage is interpreted and developed and what histories are overlooked. Selected narratives ignored pasts and abridged heritage all work to dilute and undermine the reality of such dark history.

To extend this exemplar, the plantation houses of Charleston, South Carolina, USA are cited as examples of historically important architectural structures which are the subject of conservation legislation and protection. Yet these graceful structures are the product of the worst excesses of slavery and the appalling exploitation of human labour. The continued preservation and maintenance of such buildings has been the subject of some debate. Clearly, the alternative is to allow them to decay or going further to obliterate them as flawed commemoration of slavery. This parallels debates on the maintenance of concentration camps (cf Levi, 1986) and architectural evidence of the Nazi past in Germany (cf Phillpot ,2016). Obliteration and demolition in such cases has been criticised since it may be seen as a method of disguising and covering an unacceptable past history. In the case of the Nazi regime and the development of concentration camps this indeed was the intention. The development of ‘temporary’ camps which on completion of the final solution (the annihilation of Jews and other undesirables) would in turn be annihilated like the victims they had incarcerated (Young 1993). Here then the simplistic ‘domination’ thesis fails. If such dark heritage is not commemorated it may be seen, in whole or part, as some form of complicit suppression of history. Yet, if such sites are interpreted and commemorated then the content and approach may also be seen as compromised or selective in their narratives (cf Dann and Seaton, 2001, Lennon, 2009).

Summary

Dark tourism then remains relevant and pertinent in 2016. It constitutes an inclusive term incorporating the extensive and identifiable phenomena of visitation to sites associated with mass killing, incarceration, extermination and death. The issues of what is interpreted, what merits educational content and what is ignored is related to ideologies and omissions that result from a complex interaction of commercial potential, political will and social acceptability. That such decisions are often coached in policy or budgetary decisions belies a more fundamental truth about who we are and what it is to be human.

The frequent cases of the non-commemoration of the ‘Gypsy’ holocaust merit attention because with visitation, education and interpretation it is possible that such sites retain a resonance and provide offer commemoration of acts of genocide. The non-commemoration of the Roma and Sinti genocide is a pertinent example that belies long term racial and ethnic prejudice across a range of nations that has been simply reaffirmed by the absence of commemoration in former sites of concentration camps (for further discussion see Lennon and Smith, (2004). .

The articles contained in this theme issue introduced evidence of conflicting political and cultural agendas in the context of a range of locations. The management and maintenance of education, interpretation and memory is constantly present with implications for collective acceptance of the 'dark' past projected through the site, museum and / or attraction environment. Such narratives have been defined as the process of creating multiple constructions of the past (Schouten, 1995) whereby history is never an objective recall of the past, but is rather a selective interpretation, based on the way in which we view ourselves in the present.

Dark tourism sites present significant evidence of this selective interpretation and illustrate issues of cultural consumption and heritage commodification. This in turn gives rise to societal implications including the exclusion of minority groups and problems with the ethics of 'selling' the past (Domic, 2000). The 'dark' heritage landscape continues to exist in a digital age of historical abbreviation and a society where truth has become a commodity. These dark sites will continue to be dominated by moral complexities surrounding the commemoration, education and interpretation. It is vital that we strive to ensure that content at such sites is more than a disproportionate slant on a collective view of the past that offers the majority of the visitors a chance to share in a nation's often positive historical interpretation of its past. Interpretation of merit can be judged on a broad range of criteria and is about much more than higher levels of visitation or dwell time (Rowehl, 2003). Interpretation of merit is educational, factual and can produce a degree of satisfaction and enlightenment that can accompany a genuine learning experience. It is only through addressing ethical dichotomies and dealing with selectivity in much of the dominant historical narrative, that dark tourism sites can maintain their relevance and centrality to our shared past. Such sites offer a longitudinal perspective on what differentiates us as a species. This contrasts with the immediacy of current communication through social and digital channels. It is the counterpoint to the abbreviation of news and it can offer primacy of object and 'authentic' experience in contrast to simulated and virtual alternatives. Perhaps most importantly, it offers us the evidence of our collective and unacceptable past.

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